

# **MANUSCRIPTS, MATERIAL CULTURE, AND EPHEMERA OF THE SILK ROUTE: ARTIFACTS OF EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY LADAKHI TRADE BETWEEN CENTRAL AND SOUTH ASIA**

Jacqueline H Fewkes (Florida Atlantic University) and  
Abdul Nasir Khan (Florida Atlantic University)

## **ABSTRACT**

The late nineteenth and early twentieth century system of trans-Himalayan-Karakorum trade in Ladakh (India) was a regionally significant branch of the oft-discussed "Silk Route" that connected Central and South Asia. In this article we explore the socio-political lives of Ladakhi traders during this time period through the use of varied sources, including historical documents, material culture collections, and contemporary interviews with surviving traders and the descendants of traders. This study highlights the historical dimensions of transnational global commercial connections, while providing a humanizing glimpse into the individual lives and experiences of traders in this system. The sources indicate that there were clear class hierarchies associated with the historical trade system, and that the commerce was dependent on a variety of transnational socio-political networks. Through their study we see a way of life that would drastically change within the next few decades, as trade was disrupted due to increased regional instability and the closing of national borders.

## **KEYWORDS**

history, India, Ladakh, Silk Route, trade

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Figure 1. Map of Ladakh (India).



## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

The mental images evoked by historical trans-Himalayan trade may include rugged treks through vast mountain vistas, rustic traders, and remote and isolated spaces. However, when we consider the stopping places such traders inhabited, e.g., historical marketplaces for

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international commodities, tax posts of multiple governments, and bustling inns hosting travelers from around the world, a very different narrative arises. Elite traders in the north Indian Himalayan region of Ladakh, pictured in the map below in Figure 1, were deeply embedded in a complex global economic system in the early twentieth century. They could, and did, buy even the most ordinary household items from the global market. These items included Gillette blades manufactured in the USA, buttons from Czechoslovakia, and menthol from Japan. Some were cosmopolitan consumers of literature from around the world, and their interactions with British colonial officials in India and Central Asian rulers in Turkestan/ Xinjiang placed them at the nexus of global politics. The mountain passes Ladakhi traders struggled to traverse acted as conduits, linking Central and South Asia for centuries as part of the interconnected web of trading routes often called "the Silk Route."

This article illuminates this late nineteenth and early twentieth century system of trans-Himalayan-Karakorum trade in Ladakh, traversing both the routes and stops along the way. Presented here is a collection of Ladakhi traders' own letters, accounts, artifacts, and other ephemera, that offer a glimpse of the socio-political worlds that Ladakhi traders occupied during this time period, contextualized with information from interviews with traders and the descendants of traders in the region. An informed examination of these artifacts can provide a more nuanced understanding of the workings of a little-known branch of this transnational trade system. A study of these traders' material culture highlights the historical dimensions of transnational global commercial connections, while providing a humanizing glimpse into their individual lives and experiences. This glimpse reflects several realities of the time period, including clear class hierarchies associated with this trade system, and the transnational socio-political connections that surrounded this commerce.

## SOURCES

The documents and photographs in this article are a collection of primary sources from Ladakh concerning trade in the greater Himalayan region. Our main goal is to make these available for scholarly study, as they have never been published and are not currently available in any public archives. Many Ladakhi households treasure archival and material culture associated with the late

nineteenth and early twentieth century trade system. These images convey only a small part of the resources that may be available for study. The documents selected cover a wide array of topics associated with trade and as such are invaluable in the study of both Ladakh, and Asian trade systems. They are assembled from a collection of papers that belonged to two early twentieth century traders in Ladakh, Bahauddin Khan and his son, Shamsuddin Khan. They were preserved by descendants of these traders, the Khan Manzil family of Leh. The Khan family still lives in the same house in which their ancestors had controlled trade and welcomed caravans from Central Asia for over one hundred years. Several boxes of papers had been kept in a basement of the family's house. Upon "excavation" in 1999, we found that the documents from the Khan house consisted of over 1,000 pages, and a few bound notebooks. These included a broad variety of types of papers, including memos, letters, envelopes, receipts, permits, government postings, account books, and telegrams.

Even more impressive than the number of documents was the sheer variety of topics covered in their contents. Both personal and business papers were mixed together in this pile, offering a detailed look at the lives of traders at the turn of the twentieth century in Ladakh. The goods mentioned in these pages portrayed thriving trade in numerous global commodities, and the areas that these documents had come from represented vast business networks. While the most common trade correspondence was with places now in north India and Pakistan, such as Hoshiarpur, Amritsar, Srinagar, and Lucknow, many contained news and information linking Ladakh to other countries such as Germany, Japan, the USA, England, and Russia. A majority of all the documents date from between 1900 to 1948. Those included here focus mainly on the 1930s and 1940s, just before the borders of northern India and China were closed in the early 1950s.

The documents were written in various languages, including Urdu, English, Persian, Uighur, Hindi, and Bodyig (Ladakhi written in the Tibetan script), in rough order of the frequency of language use; they use four different alphabets — Arabic, Roman, Tibetan, and Devanagari. The number of languages and scripts, combined with the use of specialized trading jargon, represented a linguistic challenge for translation. Therefore, translation of the documents was a group effort, involving over a dozen different individuals in Leh and Kargil,

as well as numerous descendants of traders in other parts of north India.<sup>2</sup>

Documents that were not written in English are presented with translations in order to make them accessible to a range of scholars interested in their contents. We have gathered many different versions of some phrases and terms, and combined information gleaned from individual knowledge of particular terms and literary styles to create more complete translations. The goal of our final version of these translations was that of general comprehension and when necessary, we revised for meaning rather than literal translation of terms, although we have tried not to substantially change the language used by the document authors. While these translations will thus help give readers new to the materials a sense of their contents, they may not convey all of the indirect information traders could glean from language use choices and other subtleties of writing. When the layout of the document is relevant for understanding, the translations are presented by overlaying English on copies of the original documents to preserve the original formatting. In addition to providing new historical sources, the presence of the documents in this article is also meant to provide a guide for those working with similar documents from the region, offering insight into the weights, symbols, calendars, and other notation systems used by Ladakhi traders.

Pictures of actual items that were traded along the trans-Himalayan routes in the early twentieth century complement the documents. Members of the Munshi family in Kargil discovered a majority of this material culture in 1994, while clearing the ruins of their old *caravanserai* for new construction. The descendants of trader and *caravanserai* owner, Munshi Aziz Bhat, found crates of old trading goods that had been left in the rubble, concealed among pieces of the roof. They collected the crates and items around them, and looked through the piles of antique trading goods with curiosity. Medicines and dyes from Europe, still in their packaging, sat beside finely embroidered caps and shoes from Central Asia. A sack that had contained sugar from Cuba, a Petro-Max oil lamp from Germany, and an antique record player all signified facets of Ladakhi participation along the Silk Route that had previously been little understood. The items from the family *caravanserai* provided the catalyst for a local history museum in Kargil, which has since been started by the

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<sup>2</sup> Translators and interviewees who have not given explicit permission for the use of their names in publication are not named here.

Munshi family. The Munshi Aziz Bhat Museum can be visited in Kargil today, and represents a significant movement to preserve local history in Ladakh. Our photographs of these goods are used to provide readers with a view of the material culture associated with the late nineteenth and early twentieth century trade networks through Ladakh. There are also a few photographs of items from other private collections in Ladakh.

The documents and commodities are contextualized through the use of interviews conducted between 1999 and 2013. During this time period we interviewed former traders and others knowledgeable about historical trade throughout northern India, in the towns of Leh, Kargil, Hoshiarpur, Jammu, and Amritsar, as well as surrounding regions. These interviews, conducted with almost fifty people, were mainly with men over the age of sixty who had been involved with the transnational trade system in Ladakh before the 1950s. Some of the interviewed were named in the documents, while others were the descendants of individuals mentioned in the documents. Still others were recommended for discussion by the first set of interviewees.<sup>3</sup>

This view of the documents and other ephemera of trans-Himalayan trade provides us with a detailed view of the lives of late nineteenth and early twentieth century traders of Ladakh. As we read the words of historical traders, we can begin to understand better the complexity of the socio-political worlds they occupied, the variety of trade goods in which they dealt, and the workings of a little-known branch of this international trade system. This article is meant to help us understand both why and how these traders engaged in such tasks. The manuscripts, material culture, and ephemera not only offer insight into a vanished system of trade, but together with the interview accounts of traders and their descendants they also tell a tale of the social and political contexts of that trade.

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<sup>3</sup> Limited selections from these sources have been previously used in some of our earlier publications, most notably in the book *Trade and Society Along the Silk Route: An Ethnohistory of Ladakh* (Fewkes 2008), and in our book chapter (Fewkes and Khan 2005). In these publications, however, only a few documents and items were featured. In this article, we present manuscripts and ephemera not previously published in our earlier works, and consider new aspects of the relationships between them.

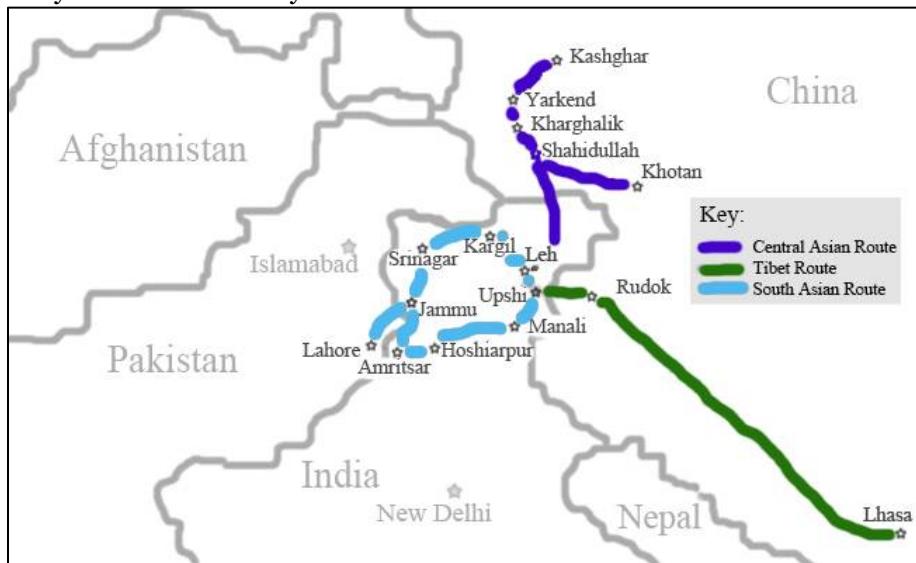
## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In 1834, Ladakh was invaded by, and subsequently became a part of, Maharaja Gulab Singh's Dogra Empire. As John Bray (1991) points out, until this time Ladakh was an independent state similar to Bhutan today. A number of authors (e.g., Gadru 1973) have argued the Maharaja's conquest of Ladakh was motivated by trade, as Ladakhi trade in pashmina, the fine goat wool commonly referred to as cashmere, was a valuable source of revenue. This seems likely as after victory the Maharaja's trade representatives were quickly sent to Ladakh to secure a government monopoly on the pashmina trade. In the 1846 Treaty of Lahore, which marked the end of the Anglo-Sikh War, the British colonial government recognized Maharaja Gulab Singh as an independent sovereign with the territory of Kashmir, including Ladakh and Skardo.

Both the Dogra and British colonial governments recognized the value of trade in Ladakh, and part of their treaty agreement required Maharaja Gulab Singh to pay an annual tribute to the British consisting of "twelve pashmina goats and three pairs of shawls" (Gadru 1973:xvi). The tribute was a symbolic statement of the relationship between trade and politics in the region. In the ensuing years, while the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir technically ruled Ladakh, the British held indirect power through trade regulation and as advisors to the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir.

The British were interested in Ladakh as a link to Central Asia and in the 1860s, the British colonial government stationed a representative in Leh. This initial posting was ostensibly in response to concerns about the negative impact of import duties, levied by both the governments of Jammu and Kashmir, and China on the colonial Indian economy (Henderson and Hume 1981:5). The British official was stationed in Leh during the summer months to regulate taxes on goods moving between Chinese Central Asia and British India, and further develop these trade links. The official's presence had the desired effect, and reportedly quadrupled Central Asian trade going to British India within only a few years (Henderson and Hume 1981:144). A treaty signed in 1870 by the Maharaja Ranbir Singh and Thomas Douglas Forsyth established an agreement to maintain and facilitate trade along the route between Srinagar, Leh, and Yarkand (Warikoo 1995: 236-237). The establishment of the so-called "Treaty Road" solidified Ladakh's role as a busy *entrepôt* in trade between South and Central Asia.

Figure 2. Trade routes through Ladakh in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.



The different branches of international Karakorum-Himalayan trade that were conducted in and around Ladakh were extremely varied. While the pashmina trade on the Tibet side and import of *cheras* (a drug) from Turkestan/ Xinjiang are often discussed as separate systems - and can indeed be fruitfully explored as such - they were also linked through their presence in Ladakh's marketplaces. Many of our informants discussed participation in multiple types of trade, and routes, although the Turkestan/ Xinjiang trade reportedly played the most significant role in their economic histories.

#### ROUTES AND TRANSPORT

*Serais* or *caravanserais* - spacious buildings in major trading towns such as Leh, Kargil, and Srinagar that were simultaneously used as inns, storage facilities, tax posts, and shops - were significant economic and social centers for North Indian and Central Asian markets. The main *serai* in Leh during this period was representative of these facilities. This two-story building had stables on the first floor for transport animals, which were grouped around a large courtyard with a prayer platform and storage spaces for goods. The

*serai* had guest rooms with attached kitchens on the second floor. Tall walls surrounded the entire building, and the strong gates at the entrance were locked at night to safeguard the valuables stored inside.

Those who made the trips remember the journey between *serais*, however, as often being dangerous. Ladakh is nestled between some of the highest mountains of the world, and the traders in this region traveled over treacherous terrain. Traders and transporters walked and led animals heavily laden with goods through passes over 13,000 feet high. Former traders reminisced that during rough journeys many of the livestock perished on these mountain passes, and skeletons marked the most heavily traded routes. During winter months, the mountain passes were blocked with snowfall and impassible, although frozen rivers could be used as uneasy highways of travel. During the summer months, traders were more easily able to cross the high passes, but were challenged by rivers engorged by the melted snow. Many travellers then used baskets on pulleys to cross the rivers and ravines.

Former traders in Ladakh recalled other methods for crossing deep rivers as well. In the Kargil region where a number of tributaries meet to flow into the Indus River, the traders commonly used goatskin floats, sewing the skins together and inflating them so that they could be carried by men and tied on horses to float across. In Kharmang, a region now in Pakistan and close to Kargil, there was a famous bridge made of tree roots that had been tied on the opposite side of the river ravine. This bridge was known to be a risky crossing place, and older traders were put into baskets so that more sure-footed men could carry them across safely.

While the Kargil side of Ladakh's route was reported to be so safe that, as one interviewee explained, a frail man of eighty years could travel without worry while carrying bags full of silver, the Central Asian routes to the east of Ladakh were patrolled by nomadic bandits who preyed on smaller groups of travelers. Traders from Ladakh recall hiding their money under the saddles of donkeys to safeguard from these threats. Supernatural threats were also commonly reported by travelers, such as a story told by one trader, who claimed that while he and his brother traveled from Kargil to Leh a spirit that looked like a fire followed alongside them at night. The brothers were frightened by the apparition, urged their horses into a gallop, and outdistanced the spirit.

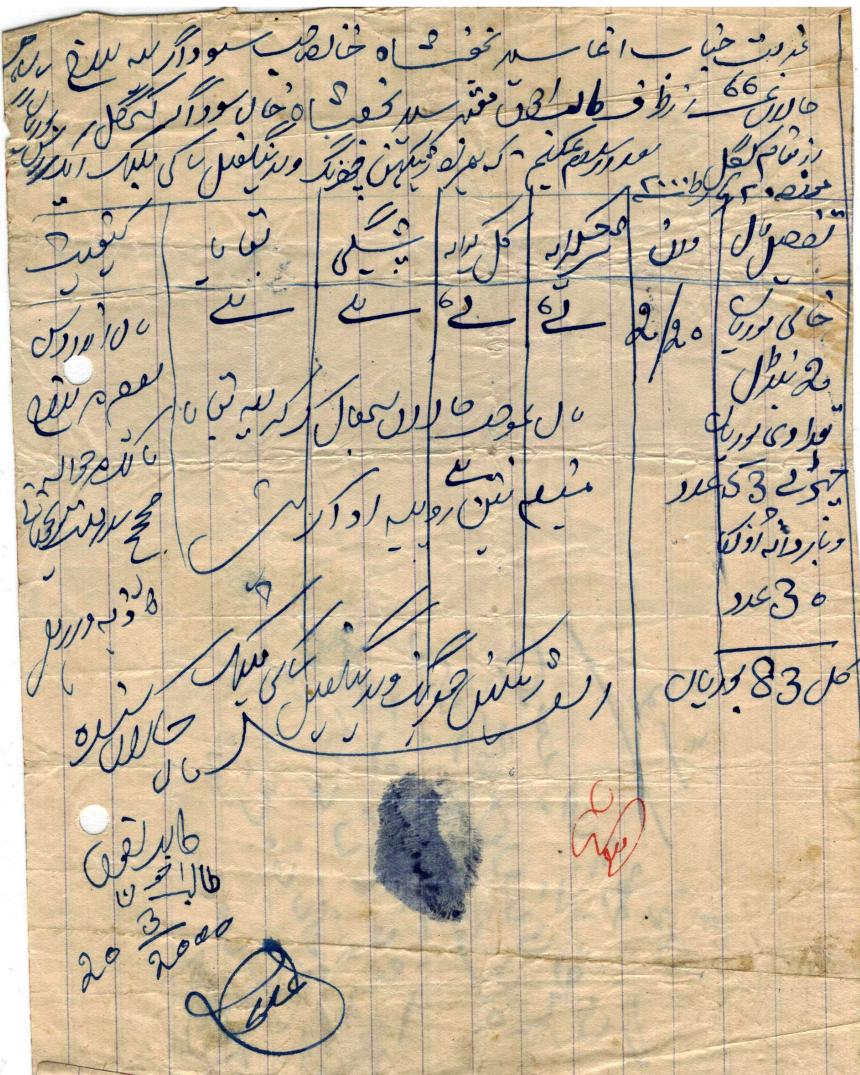
Goods coming to Ladakh from British India during this time period were brought by boat, railroad, truck, and car up to Kashmir;

once the traders reached the high Zoji-la Pass, which needed to be crossed to go into Ladakh, transport choices became more limited. Before the early 1960s, when the Indian army developed a comprehensive regional road system to secure the post-independence borders of India, there were few finished roads in the region. This was due largely to political policy; the British Indian government, in spite of their commercial interest in the Karakorum Pass route through Ladakh, deliberately spent little money on regional road maintenance and did not develop extensive regional travel infrastructures as they had in other parts of India as a preventative measure against possible invasions from the Central Asian routes (Gadru 1973:xix-xxi).

In the absence of paved roads, Ladakhi traders historically depended on different types of domesticated livestock, including donkeys, mules, ponies, horses, camels, yak, and *dzo* 'yak-cow hybrids' (*mdzo* in Wylie) to transport goods through the region. Each animal was considered to have its own particular merits for the task, for example endurance for mules, adaptability for donkeys, the ability to carry large loads for camels, and speed for horses. The availability of transport livestock was linked to certain regions and subsections of the trade routes, dependent on the types of animals that could live in the varied environments of the Himalayan valleys. The Dras area was known for its ponies, *dzo*, and horses, while transporters in the Mulbek area between Kargil and Leh mostly had donkeys and horses.

Leasing transport livestock and providing men (few, if any, women traveled as traders in the system) to handle the animals, was a major source of income for many of the small villages in these areas. In the early twentieth century almost every Mulbek Village household living above the poverty level kept five to six donkeys and horses. The villagers kept these animals to survive. Many of their descendants recalled in interviews that this was the only way they could earn an income with which to buy non-local products such as rice. Most householders aimed to own horses, which could carry more than twice the load of donkeys, and thus earn twice the amount of payment for transport services. These village men who leased and led livestock as transporters for traders were called *kirai kash* or *kiraiyakash*. The *kiraiyakash* were hired for a particular journey in agreements such as those pictured in Figures 3-6.

Figure 3. A challan 'trade agreement' from early July 1944, front side. The date is written in the Bikrami calendar, a calendar historically popular in the Punjab region of South Asia. The weight referred to here as 2/20, means that there were two *maund* (one *maund* = just over thirty-seven kilos) and twenty *seer* (one *seer* = just under one kilo). The *bohri* mentioned here are jute sacks.



Respected Sir Agha Sayeed Najab Shah Khan sahib, merchant of Leh, Ladakh. Challan number 66. From Talib Akhon. Respectable Sayeed Najab Shah Khan, merchant Kargil. At Kargil, Date 20 Har 2000. After salaam aleikum, that through Tsaskan Tsering son of Yangphel residents of Mulbek, one bundle of bohri [jute sacks].

Remarks	Balance	Advance	Total Charges	Labour Charges	Weight	Details of Goods
Goods	3 rupees	3 rupees	6 rupees	6 rupees	2/20	Empty bohri 2 bundles
Advance						Number of bohri
Collect the goods and pay the remaining balance amount 3 rupees	Leh, Ladakh	Is responsible for handling bags to the owner safe and well				Small 53 number and 30 provision
Set challan	Tsaskan Tsering son of Yangphel residents of Mulbek					Total 83 bohri
Talib Akhon						
Date 20-3-2000						
Talib [signature]						

Figure 4. The back of document in Figure 3. Translation: "Note: 53 small bohris [jute sacks] may be from the amount of wool purchased in Kargil, or it came from Sayeed Najab Shah. When Sayeed Najab Shah comes we will ask and make the accounts. [Illegible Signature]"

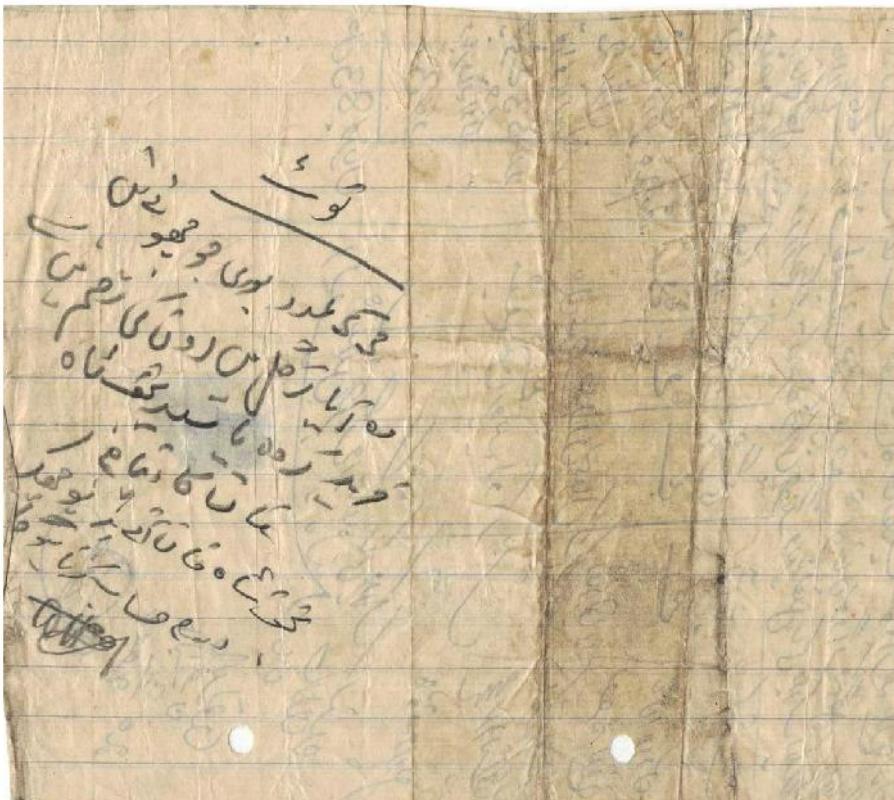
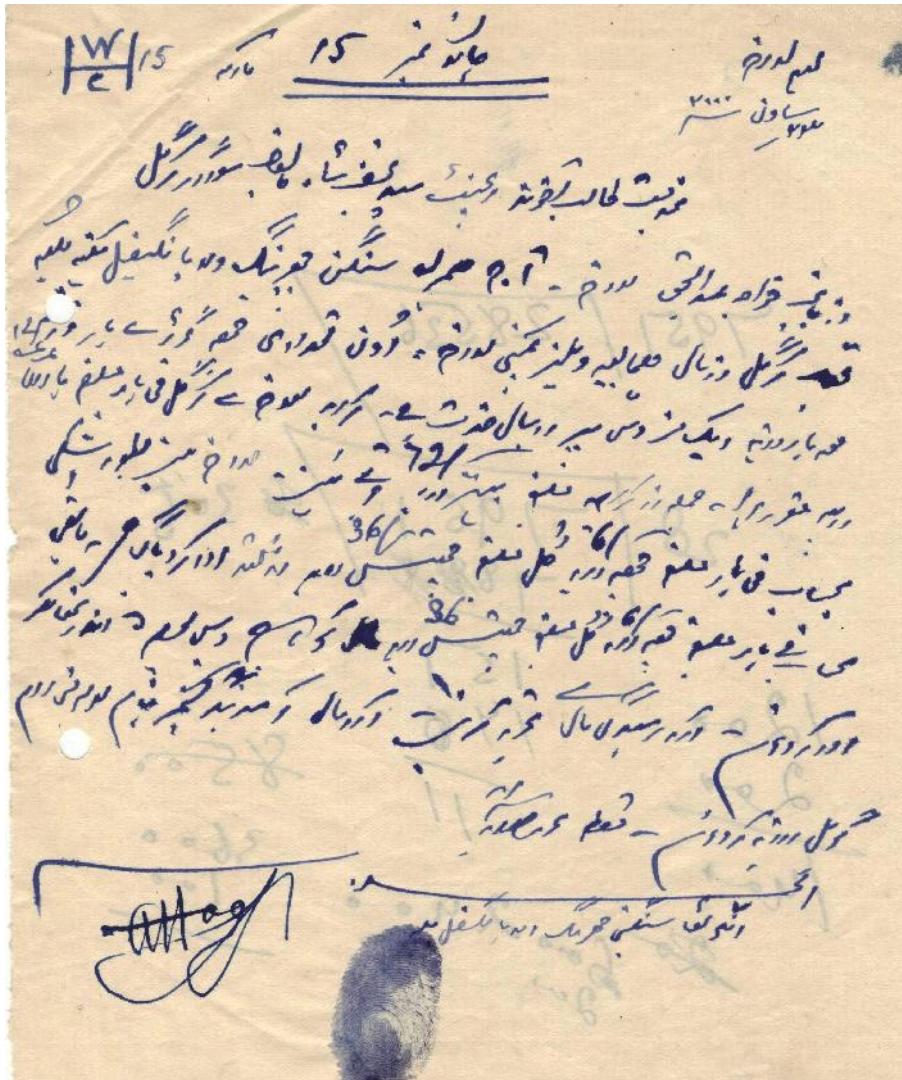


Figure 5. Challan from early August 1944. This document also uses the Bikrami calendar.



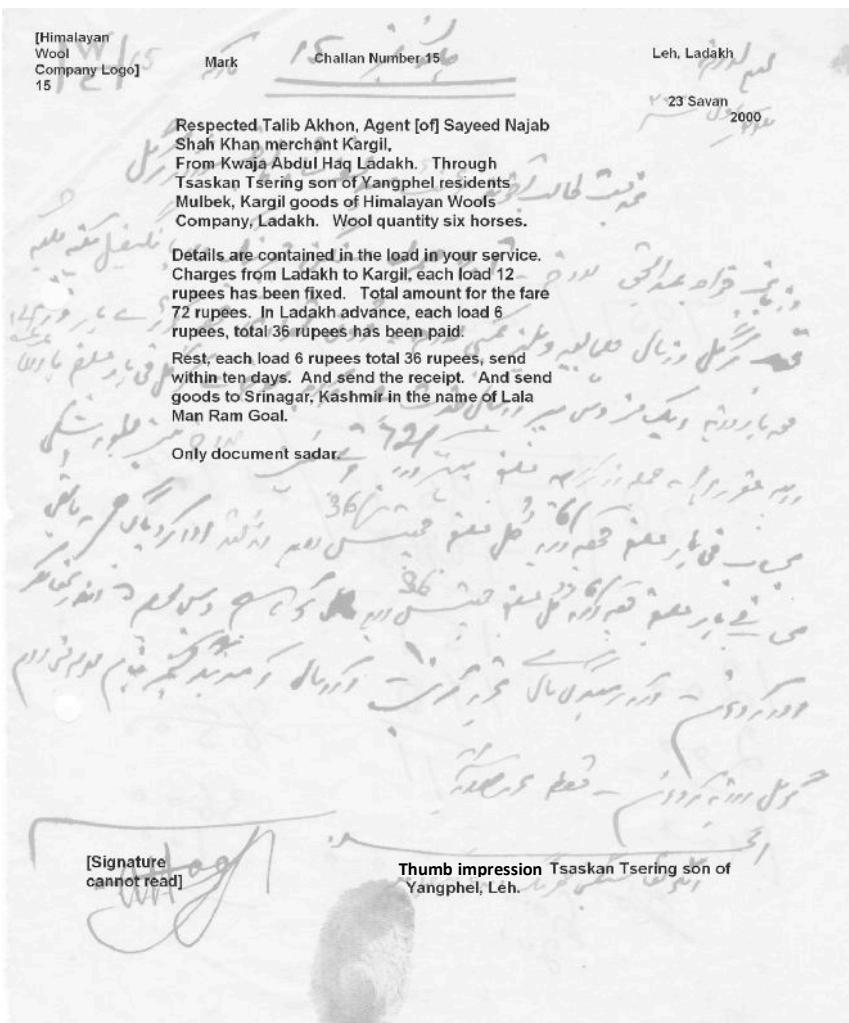


Figure 6. A third *challan* with the *kiraiyakash* signature in Bodyig. The weights used are the same specialized system as shown in Figure 3.

No. 19 challan

Talib Akhon Sahib,

Today with Tashi Sonam son of Tashi Angchuck, resident of Mulbek, 12 horses loaded with wool, property Himalaya Wool Company, have been sent. The weight of each bundle including the bag is one maun ten seer. The charge up to Kargil 9/- rupees is fixed.

Advance at this place according to calculation each horse 4 rupees, total 48/- rupees have been paid. Balance charge the sum of 60/- rupees pay after receiving the goods without any damage.

19 Nov 1943

Written by, attested,

Tashi Sonam

In the *challans* (figures 3-6), *kiraiyakash* responsibilities are outlined in highly formal terms. Both the former traders interviewed and the contents of these documents suggest that working as a *kiraiyakash* involved some degree of economic risk. *Kiraiyakash* were contractually obligated to pay the cost of any lost or damaged goods. The dates of the documents and knowledge of trade route limitations in Ladakh indicate that this was temporary seasonal work, and earnings were a sporadic source of income. The implication of this second economic feature of the *kiraiyakash* role is that there were no professional full-time *kiraiyakash* in Ladakh. Perhaps this is why the economic contributions of villagers in Ladakh within the trade system have often been difficult for historians to document.

In spite of the lack of a full-time profession, the *kiraiyakash* did occupy a distinct labor position. The men engaged in this type of trade had repeat interactions with the same traders, as shown in figures 3 and 5, building up business networks of their own in the system. The *kiraiyakash* had to be knowledgeable about the treacherous terrain in Ladakh to effectively transport goods within

the stipulated time period. Thus, while there were no professional *kiraiyakash*, there was certainly a recognizable segment of the population with an identifiable common set of social networks and career skills.

The documents also provide information about the perceived social class of the *kiraiyakash* within Ladakh and the rest of the trade networks. A majority of pre-printed or written formal documents in the archives contained a place for the signature of the traders involved. In contrast, contracts for transport with *kiraiyakash* routinely contained a section that prompted writers for the "Thumbprint of *Kirai Kash*." Informants explained in interviews that this was because it was assumed that *kiraiyakash* were the only uniformly illiterate population regularly engaged in the formal aspects of trade through Ladakh. Many *kiraiyakash* did choose to record their thumbprint in this space, which suggests, but does not prove their illiteracy. A few *challans*, such as that pictured in Figure 6, provide a slightly different view, as they have the written signatures of *kiraiyakash* in Bodyig, the Ladakhi language written in the Tibetan script. These *kiraiyakash* were simply literate in a language other than the most common language of trade documentation, Urdu. A multiplicity of languages, and associated cultural influences are thus demonstrated through these *challans*.

#### CURRENCIES AND BARTER ITEMS

As seen in figures 7 through 9, the Ladakhi traders used a variety of currencies when trading goods on the Silk Route. This was in part because they were geographically situated between three major economic powers of the nineteenth century - the British, Chinese, and Russian Empires.

Figure 7. Central Asian bank promissory note, pictured front and back, found among a Ladakhi trader's papers.



Figure 8. Another Central Asian bank promissory note, pictured front and back, from the same group of personal papers.

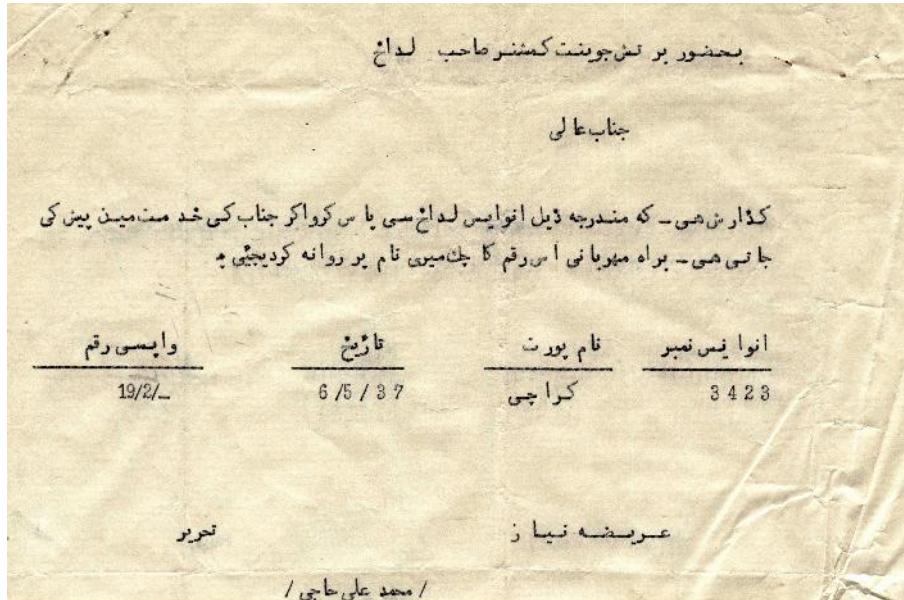


Figure 9. Russian coins from the same collection.



One of the most common currencies in Ladakhi account books is that of British India, which includes several different denominations, including *rupee*, *anna*, and *paisa*. These forms of money were often associated with trades within Jammu and Kashmir and India (see for example the documents in figures 3-6), although use of the currency was not limited to British territories alone, as British currency was reportedly used in many independent parts of Asia. The credits to major traders' in-house accounts were in the British Indian currency, as seen in the accounts. As discussed later, British currency was also used when traders paid taxes on their goods, some of which were reimbursed upon movement into tariff-free or reduced tariff trade zones, to the British government representatives as seen in Figure 10 below.

Figure 10. Traders were required to pay taxes to the British government when bringing certain regulated items into Ladakh. The tax paid was refunded once the items were registered as imported to the rest of British India by colonial customs officers outside Ladakh. This 1937 request for reimbursement is one of many such documents found in these archives. The customs reimbursement process was reportedly time-consuming and there was an entire class of traders who dealt in buying customs receipts at a discount to make a profit by working towards their reimbursement as discussed later.



Your Majesty British Joint Commissioner Sahib, Ladakh

Respected Sir,

Requesting that the following written invoice for passing in Ladakh, presenting in your service sir. Most kindly a check of this amount send in my name.

Withdrawal Amount	Date	Address	Invoice Number
19 rupees, 2 annas, 0 paise	May 6th, 1937	Karachi	3423

Written

Offering Representation

/ Mohammed Ali Haji /

Standardized goods prices were also often in British colonial currency as shown in Figure 11 below. Such price lists were circulated throughout the Ladakhi routes.

Figure 11. Common goods rates (marked in rupees/ annas/ paisa) on the South Asian branch of the Silk Route in 1944, monitored by the British colonial government.

<i>The following are the average rates according to the joint commissioners calculation:</i>		
Raw silk ...	Rs. 18/- per seer	
Namda (ordinary)	Rs. 3/- per sq. ft	
Namda (coloured) & Embroidered,	5/- per piece	
Carpets ...	1/- per ft	
Silk cloth ...	6/- per seer.	
Kham	1/- per piece	
Art silk ...	19/12/- per piece	
woollen block mats.	5/- per piece	
woollen yarn.	1/- per seer	
wakhan puttoo	7/8/- per piece	
Pipaks	1/- per piece	
Tukhi chakmar	7/8/- per piece	
Kuchi chakmar	7/8/- per piece	
Represents 25% Reduction in 1943 Rates as no figures are available for previous yrs.. Russian rice goods. Rs. 100/- Remond Rs. 125/- per bundle. S.J.C. Det. 18/9/44 S.B.S.C. Det. S.J.C. Det. 18/9/44 S.B.S.C. Det. 18/9/44		

Trade and travel in Central Asia, however, often involved Russian and Chinese currencies. Many of the Central Asian traders used the type of bank drafts, or promissory notes drawn on Chinese

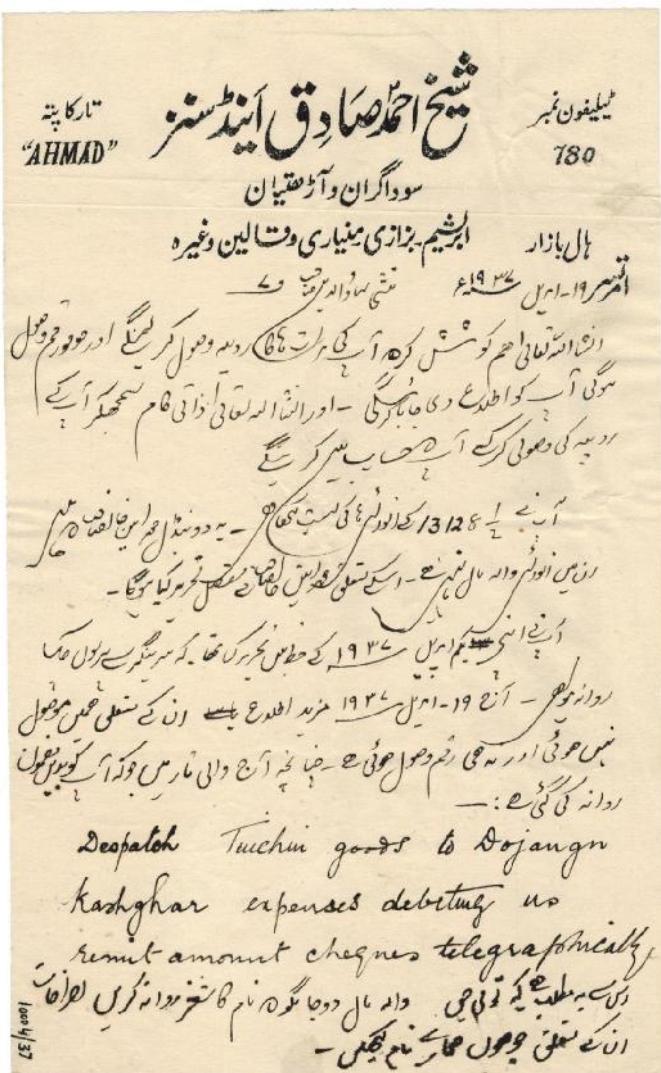
banks featured in Figure 8. These notes were considered unreliable, however, as political turmoil in the region often caused some banks to fail. Even government notes could become worthless in the event of a political coup. Some of the trader's descendants who were interviewed recalled playing with Central Asian bank notes that were stacked in their houses, including the ones pictured here, as their grandfather had decided the notes were worthless and consigned them to the dust bin. Russian coins traveled farther than paper money, and were not common currencies in Ladakh.

To avoid the vulnerabilities of these currencies, many Ladakhis accepted other items with relatively fixed values in exchange for goods and services from Central Asian traders. These included such precious metals as gold and silver, as well as semi-precious pearls and turquoise. Some of our older informants recounted seeing Central Asian traders who relied on such items when they traveled further than Ladakh, a common occurrence as many of them passed through northern India on the way to their *Haj* pilgrimage in Mecca. These travelers planned on traveling through a number of countries, and thus could not rely on a single currency. These traders would also use the Mexican silver dollar, which had very high silver content, as a common bartering item.

The economics of this system depended on the quick and reliable spread of information. Ladakhi traders depended on accurate and detailed information in order to conduct their business effectively. Price lists and requests such as those featured in Figure 11, were crucial to ensure that they were able to make a profit moving between the different markets. The postal and telegraph systems were both used frequently for the purpose of inquiring about trade information. As demonstrated in Figure 12 below, the postal and telegraph systems were considered complementary forms of communication for these purposes.

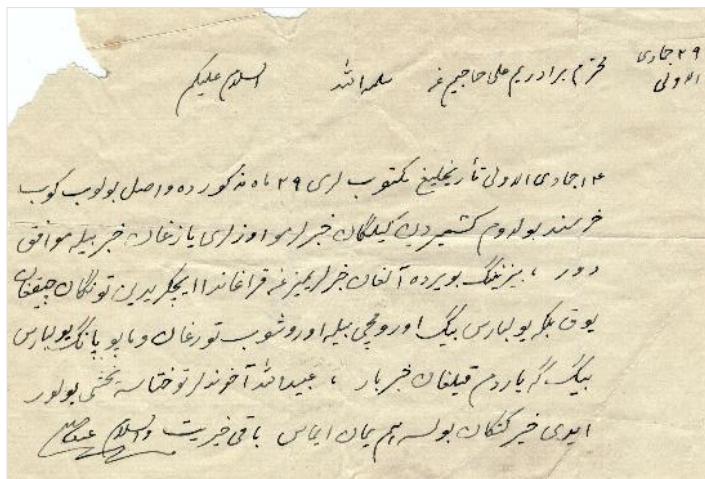
Figure 12. Translation: "If God willing we will try our best to collect your money and will inform you accordingly. And if God willing we will collect your money as our personal affairs. You have written about the invoices of 13128 1/2. These two bundles are of Mohammed Amin Khan sahib. But these goods are not mentioned in the invoices. About this Mohammed Amin Khan sahib may have written you in details. You have mentioned in your letter dated 1 April 1937 that the cheque is dispatched from Srinagar. Today 19 April 1937 we did not get any more information nor did we get any amount. Today we sent a telegram mentioning as under:

"Dispatch Tuchin goods to Dojangn Kashghar expenses debiting us remit amount cheques telegrams." [Repeats same telegram message in Urdu]."



There were other forms of information that were passed along as well. Requests for and responses regarding political events were common topics in letters, such as that in Figure 13 below, between traders concerned about the stability of their businesses.

Figure 13. Ladakhi traders were sent political information to keep abreast of the current events that could affect their trade. This letter features news about unrest from Central Asia. The date is written in the Hijri calendar; as there is no clear year it is difficult to translate the month into the Roman calendar, although Jamadi-ul-awwal is the fifth month of the Hijri calendar. If this letter dates from the mid 1930s as the events discussed within suggest, then Jamadi-ul-awwal occurred sometime in the summer.



29 Jamadi-ul-awwal

Respected Brother Ali Hajim Salamullah. A salaam alaikum.

Letter dated 14th Jamadi-ul-awwal received on 29th.

I'm glad to know the news received from Kashmir through your letter. And the news received here, we came to know that Tungans never came from inside but they are busy fighting Yunis Beg in Urumchi and Mao Young is helping them. If Abdullah Akhoon will stay or he might gone it is OK. Rest is Ok. Salaam.

[Sender's name, possibly Abdul Salam]

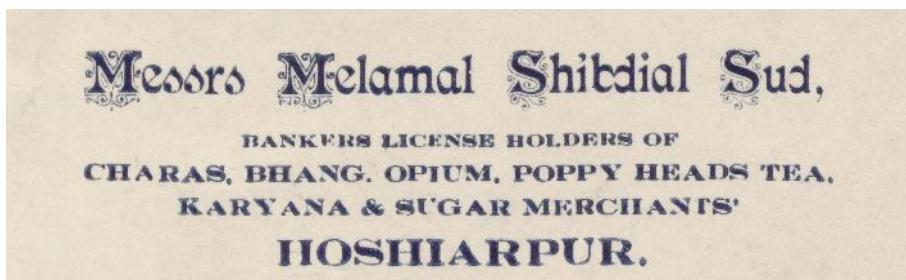
Few of the formal trade documents reflect the informal bartering that was also common between long-distance Silk Route traders and villagers, as well as within the local markets of Ladakh. Yet these exchanges occurred frequently and, according to interviews,

villagers working as *kiraiyakash* often depended on these exchanges to supplement their household resources. One former trader recalled that nomads from the Chang Tang region of Ladakh approached him with offers to bring items from their flocks such as *pashmina*, fine goat hair, or locally mined salt. The nomads would ask to trade these items for agricultural goods such as barley and wheat, exchanging the items on an agreed upon scale such as one full measure of wheat for four or five measures of salt. From the region of Skardo, long-distance traders sometimes brought items such as apricots, raisins, and mulberries. In the Leh market, small-scale traders from all parts of Ladakh met and exchanged items directly to turn, for example, their apricots into wool and salt. These local products contributed to the diversity of commodities sold along the historical Silk Route.

#### COMMODITIES OF THE LADAKHI SILK ROUTE

A common fallacy about trade along the Silk Route is that it was primarily trade in silk, as the name implies. As many scholars have recognized, the Silk Route was actually a trading conduit for varied items, and included both the expected high-value long distance commodities (e.g., silk, silver, drugs, etc.) and the aforementioned local products (see for example Bray 2005, Rizvi 1983, Rizvi 1999, Spengen 2000).

Figure 14. Letterhead from one of the more damaged papers in the archives. The legal trade of drugs from Central Asia was a high value and high profile portion of the trade through Ladakh. The drug trade was carefully regulated and taxed by the British in South Asia. This process was a significant source of income for the colonial government. This is demonstrated, in part, in the contents of figures 26 and 27 later in this article.



Records and artifacts from early twentieth century Ladakh indicate that the types of goods travelling along the Silk Route were even more varied than we might expect using this model. Long distance commodities could be smaller, low-value items that still may have been competitive in the retail market as prestige items, such as the cigarettes from the box in Figure 15, the bottle of British manufactured shoe polish in Figure 16, the tin of tobacco in Figure 17, or the packet of Japanese menthol in Figure 18. All four were marketed in early twentieth century Ladakh. These expensive luxury items were purchased and used by elite traders and their families, such as the Khan family in Leh and the Munshi family in Kargil.

Figure 15. The front of a cigarette box from the time period. Neptune Navy Cut were produced by British American Tobacco (BAT), headquartered in London. These cigarettes were most probably manufactured by BAT in an early twentieth century factory in Shanghai between 1902 (the time the company was established) and 1953 when BAT's factories in China were forcibly closed.

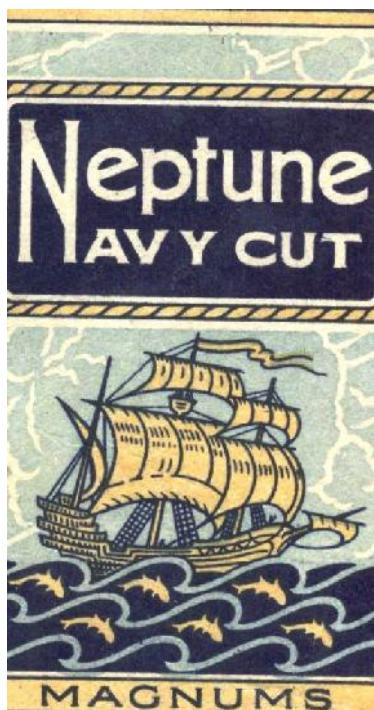


Figure 16. Shoe polish from London available for purchase in the early twentieth century Ladakhi market. It dates to the time the Chiswick Polish Co. Ltd. was established in 1913 and its transformation into Chiswick Products Ltd. in 1930.



Figure 17. Tobacco produced in Richmond, Virginia shortly after the formation of the American Tobacco Co. in 1890. The use of the Allen & Ginter name (a company taken over by American Tobacco Co.) and style of the tin suggest its manufacture dates from the early 1890s.

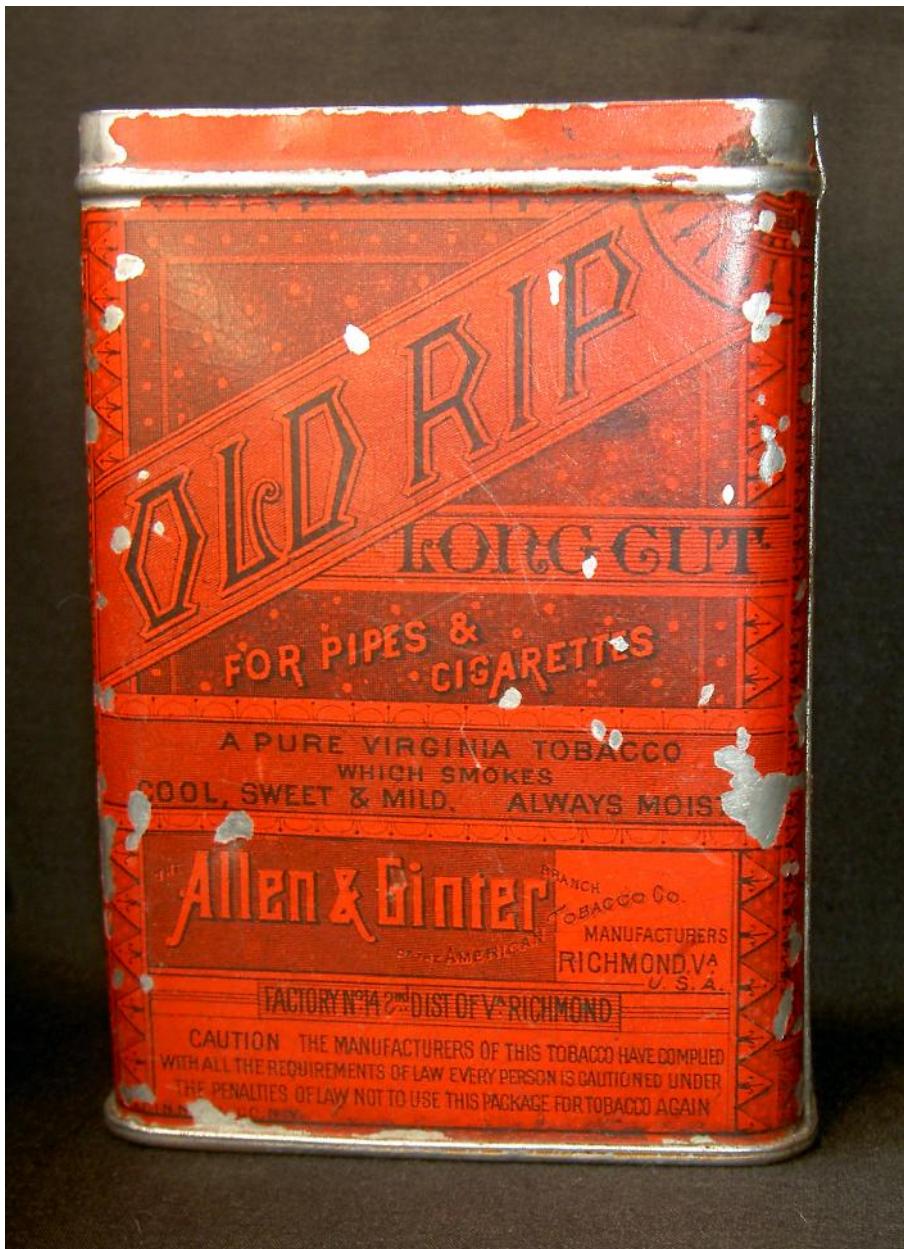


Figure 18. The presence of this packet suggests that the early twentieth century international trade through the region connected diverse parts of Asia.



Elite consumer goods ordered specially for the traders and their families were often included in caravan packs, as seen with the

Gillette blades in Figure 19, the potato mashers and hot water bottles of Figure 20, and the food items in Figure 21.

Figure 19. Unique mail order items traveled with more common goods in caravans along the Silk Route.

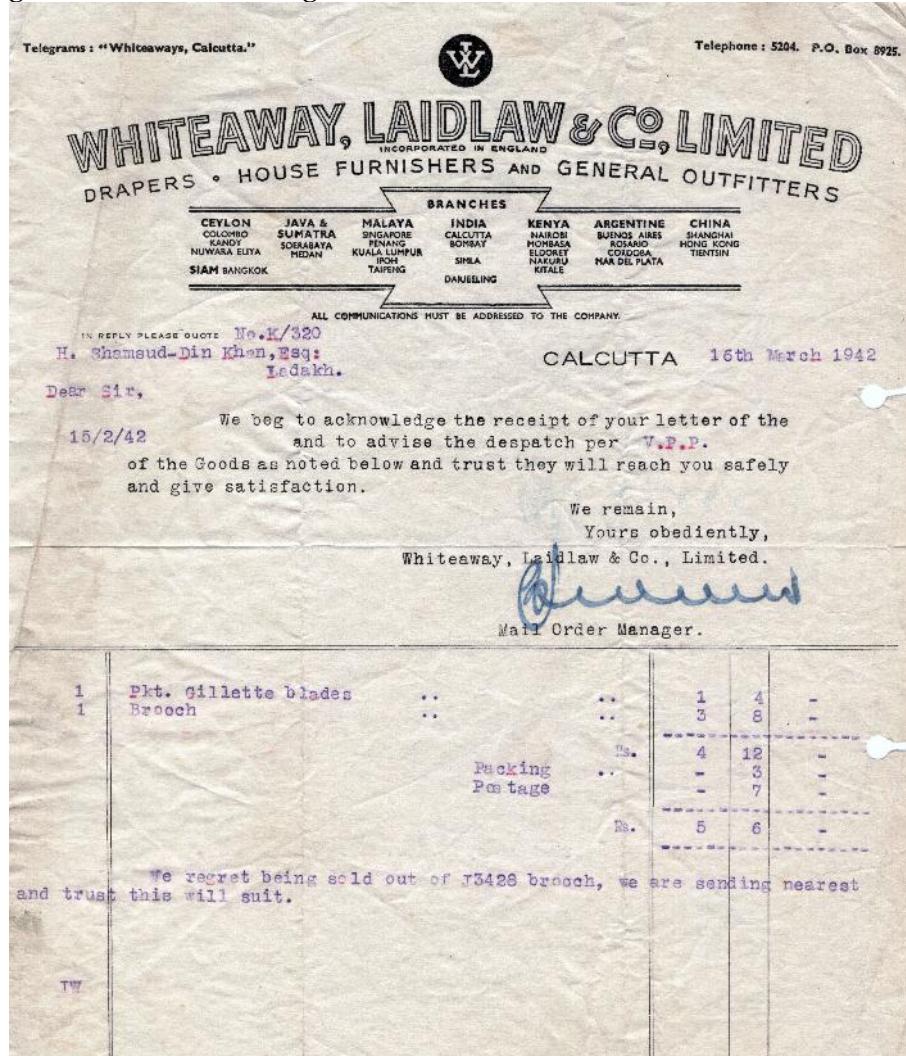
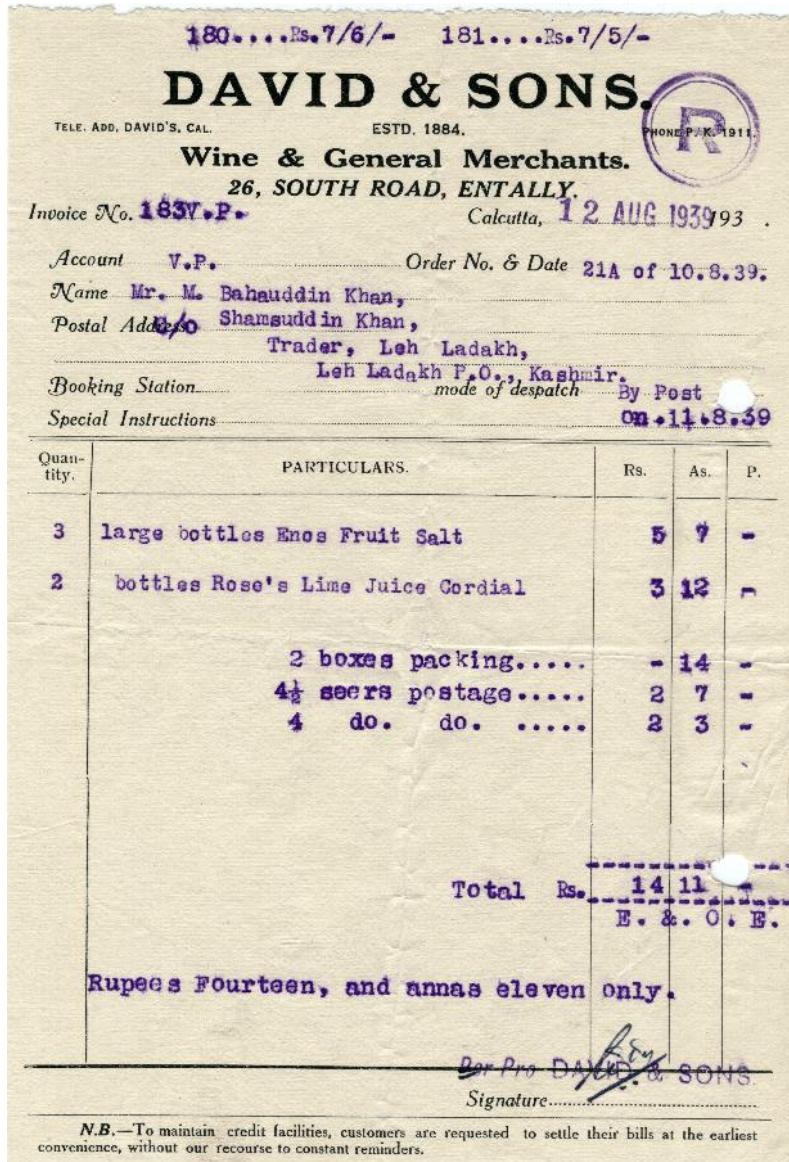


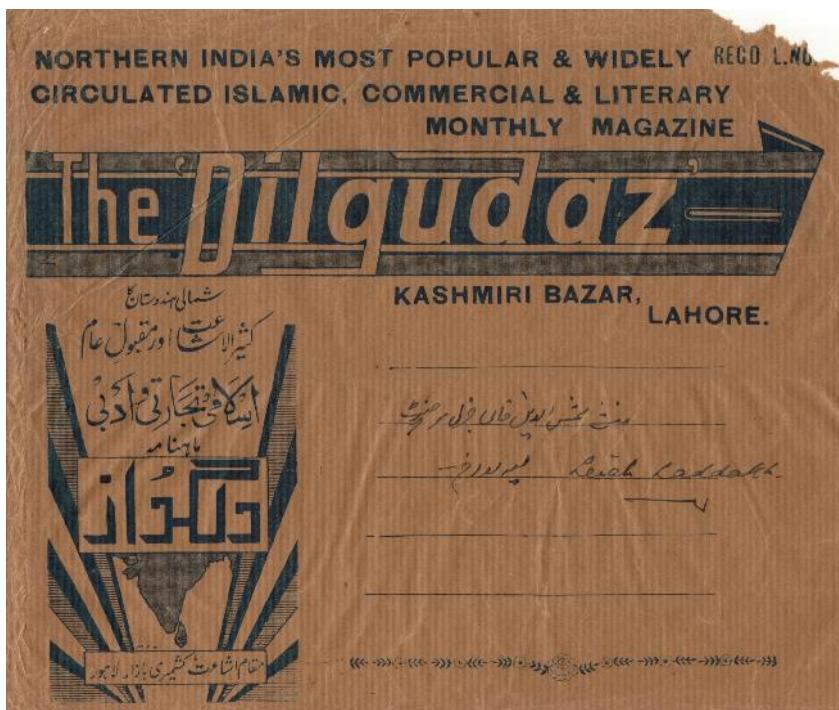
Figure 20. Hot water bottles and potato mashers were more unique items that only wealthy families were able to afford in early twentieth century Ladakh.

Figure 21. This final example of luxury goods brought for personal consumption suggests changing tastes in Ladakhi cooking. While Enos Fruit Salts was often marketed as a health item when invented in the 1850s, and were reportedly used as such in Ladakh, they were also used for baking in certain southern Indian foods.



Elite Ladakhi traders were cosmopolitan consumers of goods that were not commonly available to the rest of the population in Ladakh. These traders and their families, had access to varied and expensive items and reportedly engaged in very public displays of their wealth. For example, several consultants referred to wealthy traders in the early twentieth century who sent their dry cleaning on the backs of animals, over the mountains to Srinagar, and received their clean laundry a few months later in return. These traders were not only engaged in elite consumerism, they also had access to news and ideas that circulated in a privileged cultural sphere in north India through magazines such *Dilgudaz 'Heart-Melting'* pictured in Figure 22. *Dilgudaz* was a literary magazine edited by Abdul Halim Sharar, a famous figure in Urdu literature during the time period, who explored many issues associated with Indian identity and colonialism in his work (Naim 2012).

Figure 22. The envelope for the *Dilgudaz* magazine, sent to Shamsuddin Khan on 25 June 1937.



In addition to these unexpected elite luxury items, the Silk Route through Ladakh was a conduit for the flow of both raw goods and finished items, making possible a complex circular pattern of trade. For example, wool from British India and dyes from Germany were traded into Central Asia to make carpets that would in turn be exported to Europe and the United States.

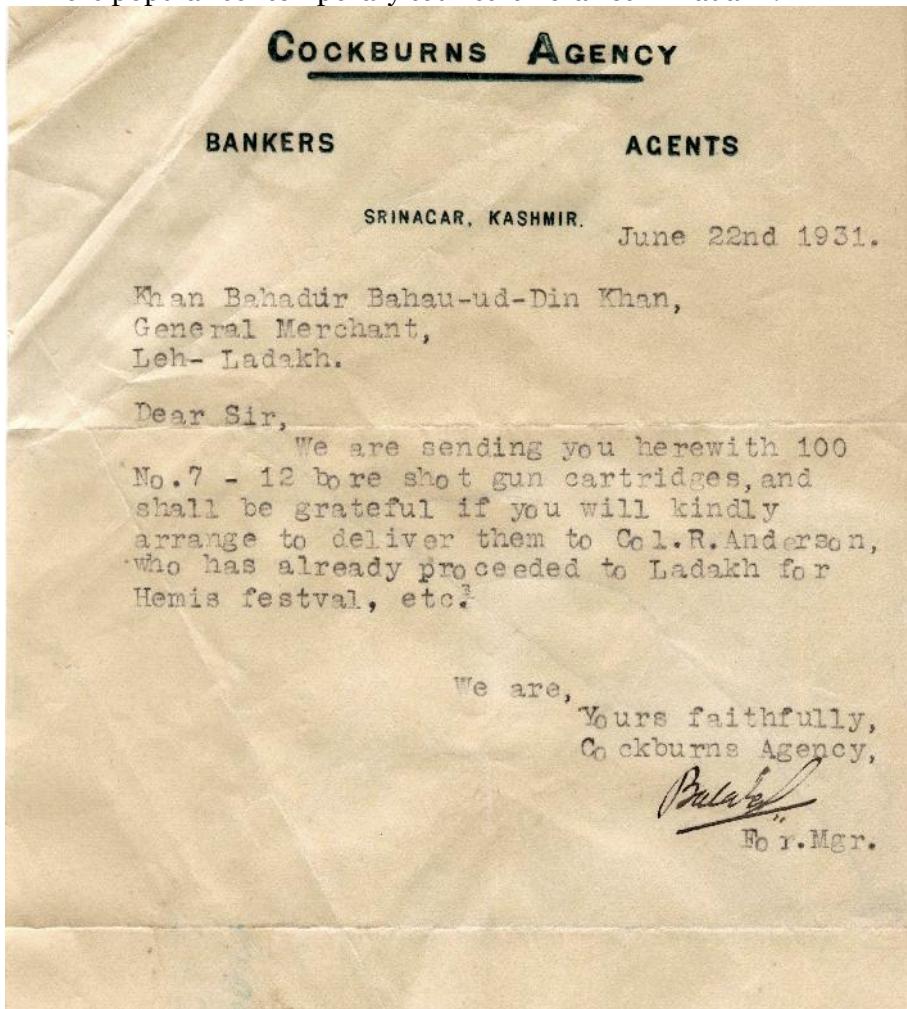
Circulation of these goods highlights the complexity of the networks of Ladakhi trade in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They truly represent global commerce. Joining together the documents and material culture of Ladakh's Silk Route, we gain a deeper understanding of the international trade that flowed through Ladakh. For example, Gillette blades found in the material culture of the Kargil collections are given provenance in the Figure 19 document from a British dry goods purveyor in Calcutta. The sum of goods either present or alluded to in the Ladakhi trade archives and artifacts hint as to how global trade might have both shaped and been shaped by Ladakhi lifestyles.

#### THE SOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF TRADE

Another major force in both the economic and social lives of Ladakhi traders was that of the British colonial government in South Asia that played an active role in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Ladakh through the auspices of the Dogra regime in Kashmir.

Ladakhi traders had various types of interactions with British colonial officials in Ladakh. While they were subject to the power of these officials, and sometimes had to write petitions as supplications, they also dealt professionally with the British in many capacities. The Ladakhi traders with access to a wide variety of goods in the global marketplace, acted as agents and purveyors of required items for British officers visiting the region. In Figure 23, for example, we see Ladakhi traders acting as a part of a network of commercial agents working within the colonial economy.

Figure 23. Col. Anderson's 1931 attendance at Hemis, a religious festival associated with one of the Buddhist monasteries in Ladakh, mirrors popular contemporary tourist itineraries in Ladakh.



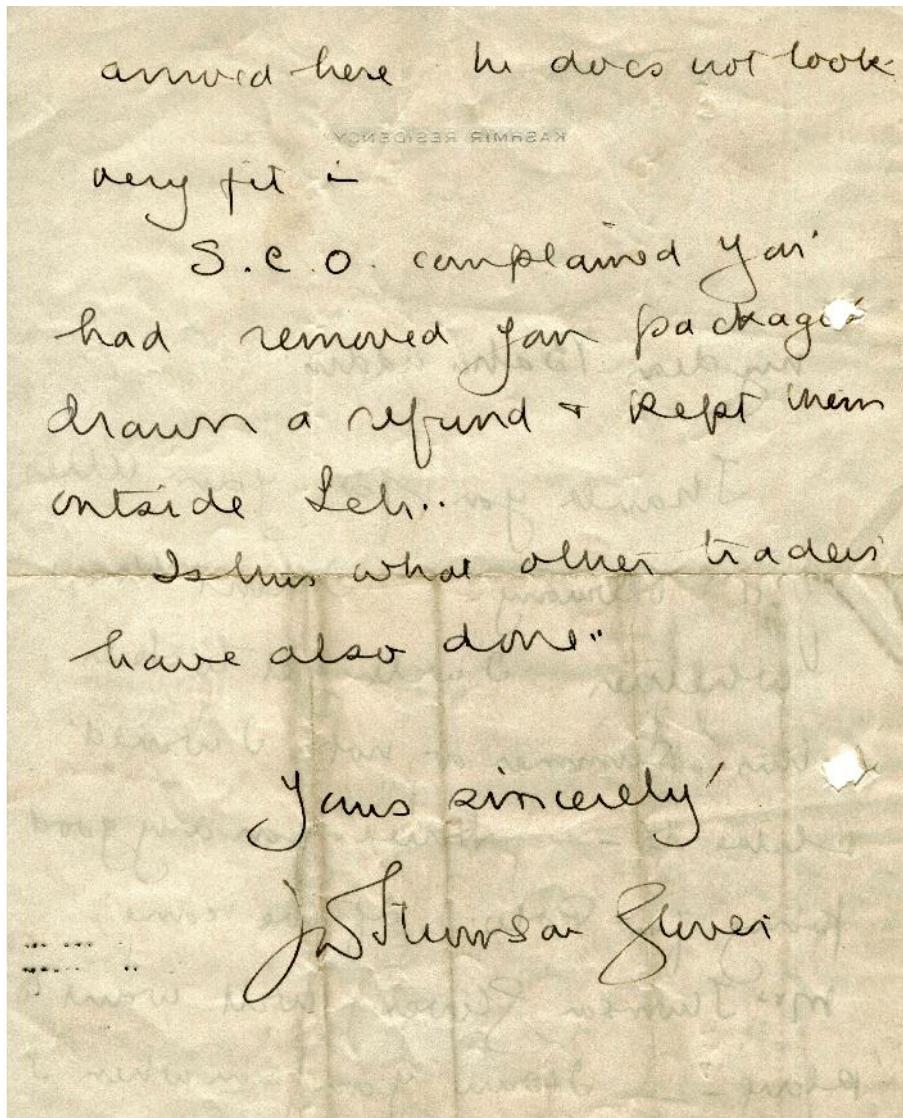
Certain Ladakhi traders occupied an elite status in relation to colonial rule in Ladakh. Ladakh's international traders had become wealthy, powerful local figures that interacted with British colonial officials socially. At times, they profited from their social connections with the British. In the letter of Figure 24 we can see an example of the ways in which social and political relationships between British colonial officers and Ladakhi elites overlapped.

Figure 24. One letter, front and back. The author, JW Thomson-Glover, was a distinguished British officer with a long career in the British colonial empire. He fought in Egypt in 1915 as a lieutenant of the 92nd Punjabi Regiment. From 1923 to 1924, he was the British political agent for the South Waziristan region (now northwestern Pakistan). He was appointed as the British Consul Officer in Kashgar from 1934-1936, and acted as a resident in Kashmir sometime prior to 1938. The text reads: "My dear Bahauddin, Thank you for your letter of 11th February. I don't know whether I will get to Leh this summer or not. I would like to - have you any good pony for polo. If we come Mrs. Thomson Glover will want to play. I saw your son when I arrived here he does not look very fit - S.C.O. complained you had removed your package, drawn a refund, & kept them outside of Leh.. Is this what other traders have also done.. Yours sincerely, J.W. Thomson-Glover".

KASHMIR RESIDENCY.

my dear Baba addres.

Thank you for your letter.  
of 11<sup>m</sup> February - I don't know  
whether I will get to Let  
this summer or not. I would  
like to - Have you any good  
pony for Polo. If we come  
Mrs. Thornean Glaser will want to  
play - I saw you son when I



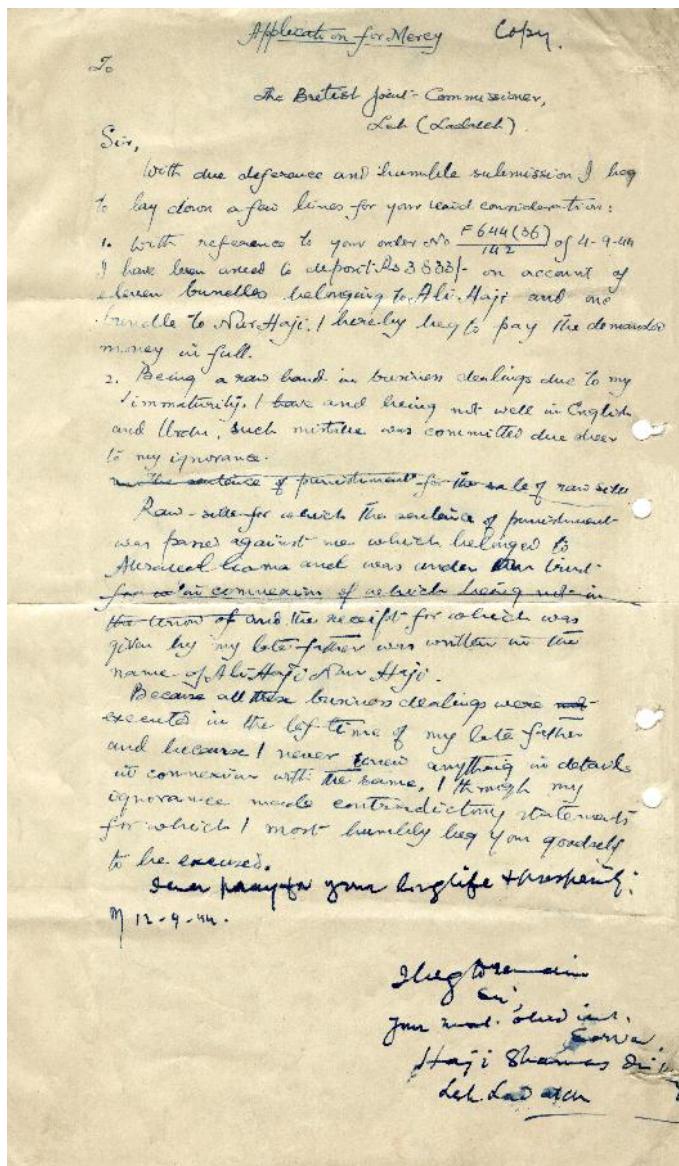
This letter was written by JW Thomson-Glover, the British Resident in Kashmir at the time of writing. His wife resided with him at most of his postings, and the couple enjoyed an active social life in the Himalayan region. His discussion of polo ponies for his wife, and concern about Bahauddin Khan's son in Figure 24, suggest that the two families were personally acquainted and had socialized with each other. The second part of the letter that reports on the complaints of the SCO (State Customs Officer), shows that the social relationship

was complex. Khan's personal relationship and correspondence with Thomson-Glover allowed him to keep abreast of significant political developments, and in this particular case to discuss trade matters related to his business directly and unofficially with government officials. The direct question that Thomson-Glover poses to Khan at the end of his letter "Is this what other traders have also done," can be read in two ways. It could be a confidential inquiry from one friend to another about how business was being conducted, or a command for more information from a colonial official to trader dependent on that official's benevolence, i.e., a demand for Khan to justify his behavior. A draft of the letter Khan issued in response, not pictured here, suggests the latter interpretation in both form and content. The form, a typed draft that would later be corrected and re-typed, contrasts with that of Thomson-Glover's brief, handwritten, and informally composed letter. A number of linguistic choices in the response draft also indicate status imbalance, including the use of formal titles such as "mem Sahib" for Mrs. Thomson-Glover, and his request that Thomson-Glover consider him as part of a group of "poor traders" victimized by the SCO in question.

To fully understand the complexity of the colonial relationship, however, we need to consider this letter in relation to a body of colonial documents, including petition letters to British officers such that in Figure 25 below.

Figure 25. A petition to the British High Commissioner from Bahauddin Khan's son, Shamsuddin Khan, dated September 12, 1944. It reads, "Application for Mercy. Copy. To The British Joint Commissioner Leh (Ladakh). Sir, With due deference and humble submission I beg to lay down a few lines for your kind consideration. With reference to your order No F644(36)/142 of 4-9-44 I have been asked to deposit Rs. 3833/- on account of eleven bundles belonging to Ali Haji and one bundle to Nur Haji. I hereby beg to pay the demanded money in full. Being a raw hand in business dealings due to my immaturity ~~I have~~ and being not well in English and Urdu, such mistake was committed due sheer to my ignorance. ~~The sentence of punishment for the sale of raw silk~~ Raw-silk for which the sentence of punishment was passed against me which belonged to Aksakal [illegible name] and was under trust ~~for in connexion of which being with in the know of~~ and the receipt for which was given by my later father was written in the name of Ali Haji & Nur Haji. Because all these business dealings were executed in the lifetime of my late father and because I never knew anything in details in

connexion with the same, I through my ignorance made contradictory statements for which I most humbly beg your goodself to be excused. I ever pray for your long life and prosperity. Of 12-9-44. I beg to remain sir, Your most obedient servant, Haji Shamsuddin Khan Leh. Ladakh"



This document reveals a very different set of power relations. Shamsuddin Khan, who signs off his letter to the British Joint Commissioner in Figure 25, "I beg to remain, Sir, Your Most Obedient Servant," was clearly not in the same social position to colonial powers as his father, Bahauddin Khan, who signed his draft "Your[s] Sincerely" in other documents.

### THE COLONIAL ROLE IN THE LADAKHI SILK ROUTE TRADE

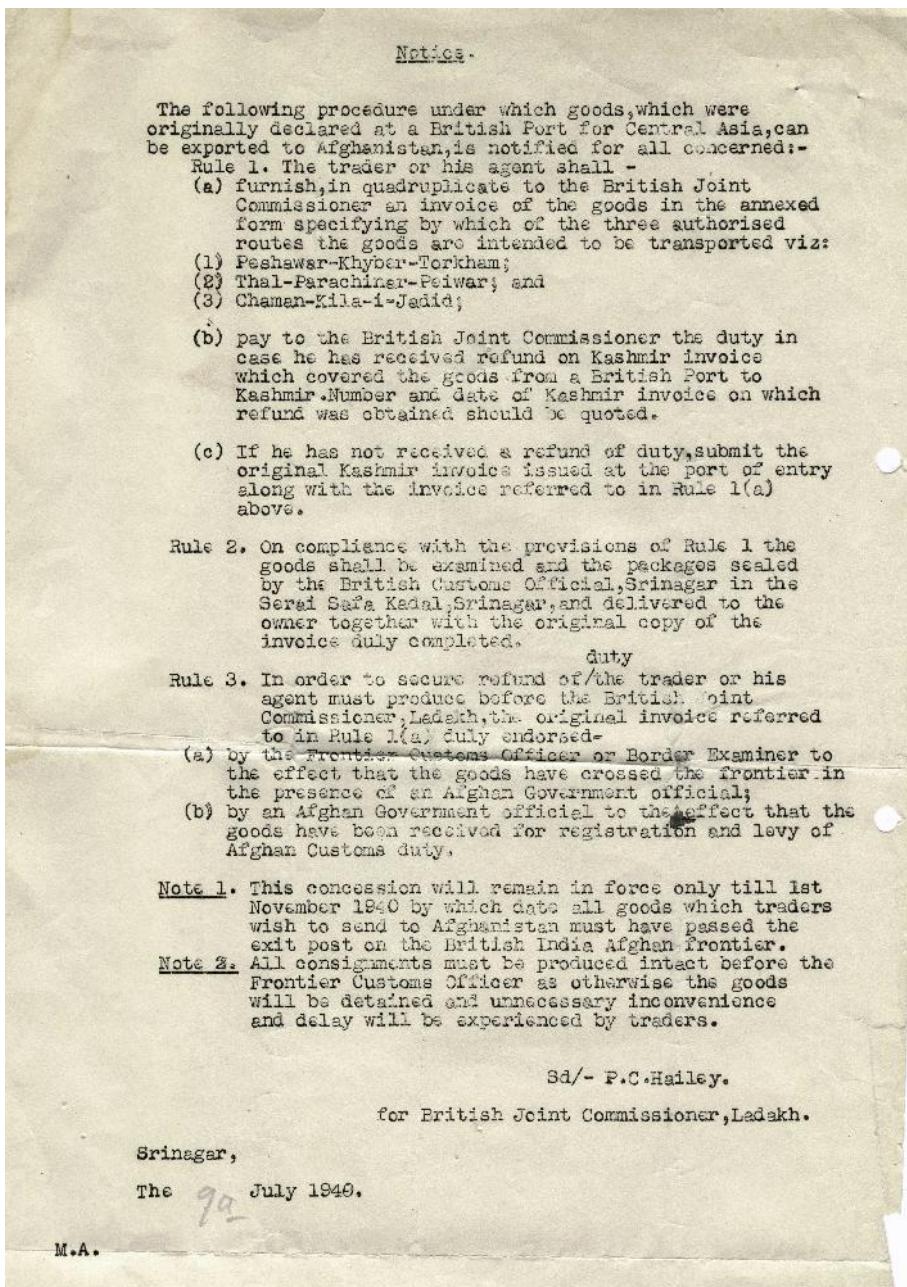
The ripples from the British Indian political economy link Ladakhi history to that of the rest of South Asia, despite it being part of the native state of Jammu and Kashmir. The early twentieth-century British colonial government of India faced numerous challenges to its political power in South Asia. By 1919, the British began responding to public criticism by allowing local administrations to use the money collected from land revenue, which meant significant losses of revenue that had previously supported the British colonial economy (Tomlinson 1982). While land revenue was not collected in Ladakh, which was part of a "native state," this colonial loss of revenue impacted the region as it took place in an already volatile regional market and, between 1900 and 1935, colonial market prices for common goods fluctuated widely, destabilizing early twentieth-century South Asian markets (Roy 1995).

The market fluctuations would have added to Ladakhi traders' need to inform partners of the latest market prices, as discussed. Direct British management of South Asian trade in general declined and Indian owned local firms gained a great deal of power in this nationalist market as Mahatma Ghandi's *swadeshi* movement encouraged consumers to purchase local products. Ladakhi traders experienced these changes through their partner firms in other parts of South Asia, such as in Hoshiarpur, Amritsar, and Lahore. The British colonial government later increased import revenues in British India to recover the land revenue losses (Tomlinson 1982). The frequent changes in revenue laws were enacted in Ladakh as well, as evidenced by some of the government announcements below. The subsequent control of the import of foreign goods provoked further resistance in colonial South Asia and in Ladakh, may have been the beginning of a shadow economy in which traders bought and sold customs invoices.

The buying and selling of customs invoices was possible because of a late nineteenth-century agreement between the British

government and the government of Jammu and Kashmir to free trans-Karakorum trade between British India and Chinese Central Asia of import taxes in an attempt to increase colonial trade. Separate, higher tax rates were established for goods that were traded within Ladakh from either India or China, in contrast to those that were moved through Ladakh between British India and Chinese Central Asia. Traders or agents acting on their behalf, had to pay the higher customs taxes on packages when entering Jammu and Kashmir. The British government regularly updated customs laws to meet the needs of their changing empire, as evidenced in the new rules for the Afghanistan border in 1940 that were posted in the public notice featured below in Figure 26.

Figure 26. A colonial government announcement dated 9 July 1940.



Customs control required a great deal of government infrastructure, as all goods had to be processed by border officials. As alluded to in Figure 26, the goods that were designated for transport only, not for sale in Ladakh, were sealed by government officials with a stamp to prohibit any tampering. In the trading documents these were referred to as "stamped packages." The contents and value of each package were noted, and payment was based on a rate per unit or a percentage of value. The traders were then issued customs invoices and receipts for the amount of taxes they had paid. Once the goods reached the government customs check-post at their point of departure from Jammu and Kashmir, the sealed packages were produced to prove all the goods were still in transit. The British Joint Commissioner provided customs refund forms that could be cashed by the traders to regain money they had paid earlier when bringing goods into Jammu and Kashmir. Thus earlier in Figure 10, we see a trader requesting a "Withdrawal Amount" to refund the customs taxes that had been paid on an item transported through Ladakh. Before submitting this request, the trader had the item assessed by government inspectors who signed the invoice to verify that the package had arrived intact in the British Indian city of Karachi. Another trader could also be designated as the representative for customs and duty purposes, as demonstrated below in Figure 28.

Figure 27. Packages with customs duties and the attendant paperwork.

no. F.353 (111)/40.																																													
<u>O R D E R</u>																																													
Dated Srinagar, the 31st July 1940.																																													
Sabir Haji, Central Asian Trader, Srinagar, is permitted to bring back from Ladakh to the Serai Safa Kadal, Srinagar, the consignment covered by the following invoices:-																																													
<table border="0"> <thead> <tr> <th style="text-align: left;">Invoice No.</th> <th style="text-align: left;">Date.</th> <th style="text-align: left;">Port.</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr><td>1057. ✓</td><td>15-7-37.</td><td>Bombay.</td></tr> <tr><td>1260. ✓</td><td>31-7-37.</td><td>"</td></tr> <tr><td>1287. ✓</td><td>3-8-37.</td><td>"</td></tr> <tr><td>1296. ✓</td><td>-do-</td><td>"</td></tr> <tr><td>1379. ✓</td><td>10-8-37.</td><td>"</td></tr> <tr><td>1314. ✓</td><td>5-8-37.</td><td>"</td></tr> <tr><td>1315. ✓</td><td>-do-</td><td>"</td></tr> <tr><td>1275. ✓</td><td>2-8-37.</td><td>"</td></tr> <tr><td>1511. ✓</td><td>16-8-37.</td><td>"</td></tr> <tr><td>1533. ✓</td><td>17-8-37.</td><td>"</td></tr> <tr><td>12437% ✓</td><td>20-8-37.</td><td>Karsachi.</td></tr> <tr><td>12438. ✓</td><td>-do-</td><td>"</td></tr> <tr><td>2599. ✓</td><td>29-4-37.</td><td>"</td></tr> <tr><td>26066. ✓</td><td>8-2-37.</td><td>"</td></tr> </tbody> </table>	Invoice No.	Date.	Port.	1057. ✓	15-7-37.	Bombay.	1260. ✓	31-7-37.	"	1287. ✓	3-8-37.	"	1296. ✓	-do-	"	1379. ✓	10-8-37.	"	1314. ✓	5-8-37.	"	1315. ✓	-do-	"	1275. ✓	2-8-37.	"	1511. ✓	16-8-37.	"	1533. ✓	17-8-37.	"	12437% ✓	20-8-37.	Karsachi.	12438. ✓	-do-	"	2599. ✓	29-4-37.	"	26066. ✓	8-2-37.	"
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The trader has deposited Rs.3484/- being the duty of the above mentioned consignment.																																													
Sd. P.C. Haily, for British Joint Commissioner, Ladakh.																																													
Copy to:-																																													
1. Sabir Haji, Serai Safa Kadal, Srinagar. 2. The Inspector, Customs & Excise, Srinagar. 3. The Inspector General, Customs & Excise, Srinagar. 4. The Deputy Inspector, Customs, Serai Safa Kadal, Srinagar. 5. The Special Charas Inspector Officer, Leh-Ladakh. 6. The British Customs Official, Srinagar. for information.																																													
By order																																													
Sd. S.K. Ayangar, for British Joint Commissioner, Ladakh.																																													
(True Copy.)																																													

Figure 28. A legal affidavit written on stamped paper, which was used for official purposes.

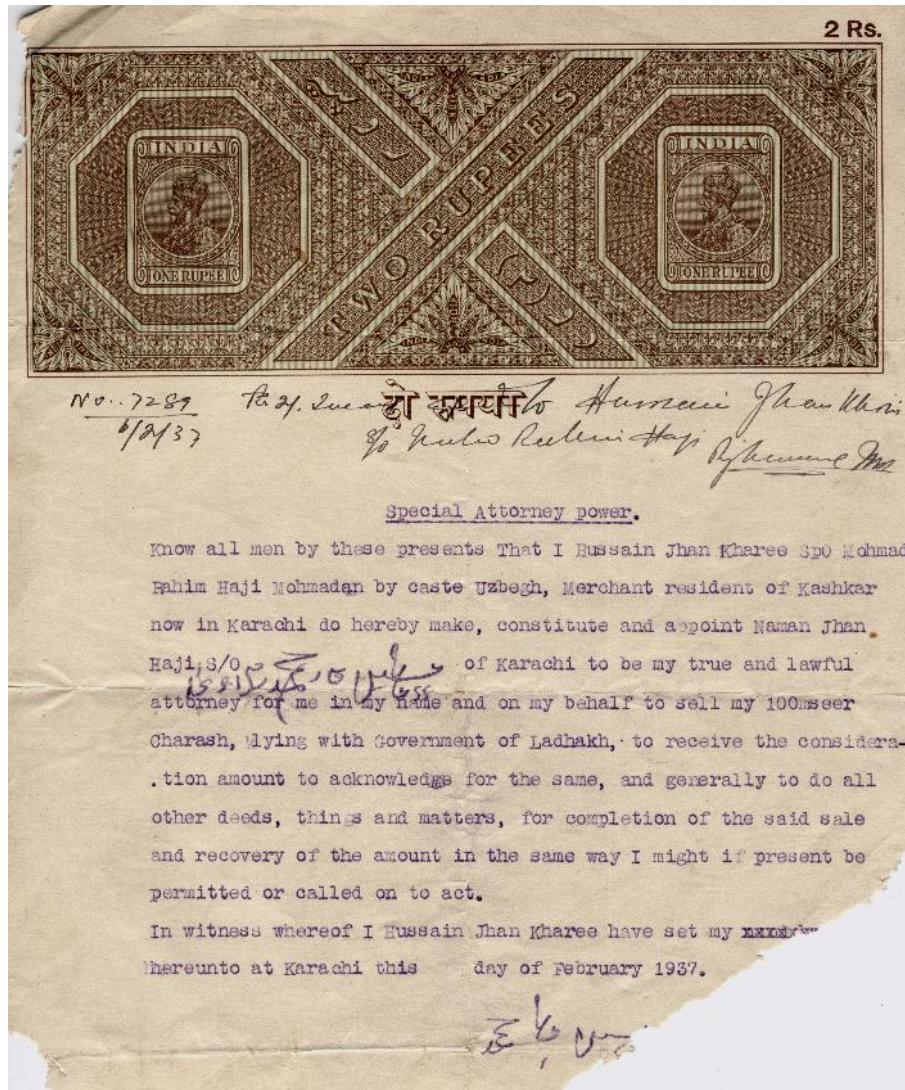


Figure 29. A stamped paper heading, printed in London, as shown in inset. Thomas De La Rue is currently, according to their company profile online, the "world's largest commercial banknote printer and passport manufacturer." They were suppliers of stamps for the East India Company since the mid-nineteenth century.



This system depended heavily on the meticulous accounting and communication methods detailed in the previous section, as traders had to provide detailed invoices when each package was inspected. The note for a customs refund request in Figure 10 is particularly interesting, as the Urdu in this document was typed on a typewriter. Similar to the typewritten English in other documents, this document provides evidence of additional types of communications technologies used in the Ladakhi trading system.

## CONCLUSION

The fluctuation of prices within the Indian market was of central concern to British officers in Ladakh. This is why in Figure 11 we see that the British Joint Commissioner reported on rate changes regularly. In this case, a detailed list of various cloth goods and the expected rates for each type by either a standard piece size, standard bundle size, square foot, and yard is given. Contrary to what we might expect to see in the 1944 wartime economy, the author notes in this document that the commodities' rates had actually decreased since the previous year. The particularly high rates for Russian cloth mentioned in the Figure 12 document indicate how colonial taxes

influenced the trade of foreign commodities in British India and Central Asia.

As global markets shifted throughout the twentieth century, the elite Ladakhi traders also faced a gradual growth in political constraints on their ability to trade. The borders between China and India began to close, and many traders could not contact their partners in Yarkend and Kashgar, and thus faced numerous legal problems. The petition written by Shamsuddin Khan in Figure 25 offers us a view of the frustration of Ladakhi traders as they dealt with colonial responses to this crisis. By 1944, Shamsuddin Khan was left with a number of goods that were unclaimed by his trading partners. The "unfavorable circumstances that arose in Central Asia" that he mentions refer to the political unrest in Chinese Central Asia (also alluded to in Figure 14) that later led to the exodus of Ladakhi traders from Kashgar.

Shamsuddin Khan's partners in Central Asia could not travel to claim their goods or communicate how to dispose of those goods, thus Jammu and Kashmir state government representatives confiscated the goods claiming wrongful management of properties as responded to in Figure 25. This breakdown in communications and travel of the 1940s Ladakhi trade networks was part of geopolitical changes that signified less profitable circumstances for trade relations between many of the Ladakhi and Central Asian traders. This was the beginning of the end of the trans-Himalayan "Silk Route" trade through Ladakh. These documents thus represent a significant moment of change in both regional and global histories, as well as the socio-political terrain in which these changes were located.

The risks of late nineteenth and early twentieth century trans-Himalayan trade could be great, whether facing the physical difficulties of transport through the mountains, the bureaucratic challenges of colonial government paperwork, or the shifting prices in a high stakes market. Traders engaged in this risky endeavor with the promise of access to elite status and wealth. The traders occupied complex social positions, forming their own cosmopolitan community that interacted with the British colonial officers socially, beyond purely economic and political dealings, yet they were still bound by colonial power structures. The material culture mentioned in the documents and found in the museum collection, suggests these traders were sophisticated consumers of global products, and participants in transnational networks of knowledge. In sum, these sources provide a window through which to view a way of life that

would drastically change later within the next few decades. As trade responded to increased regional instability it slowly tapered until 1950, when the borders between South and Central Asia were closed to legal trade. The end of these vast trade networks signified a major shift in global economic flows and also fundamentally changed personal circumstances, forcing transnational traders to develop new livelihoods and adjust to the altered socio-economic networks.

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